



What do we mean by ‘Gender’?

Language

By 1980, most feminist writings had agreed on using gender only for socioculturally adapted traits.

[Wikipedia entry on “Gender”](#)

The use of the word “gender” in political studies is relatively new. Up until the 1950s the word only had meaning in the grammar of languages. As indicated in the quotation above, its well-established use to refer to socially applied stereotypes as distinct from biological, physical attributes dates from the 1980s.

The meaning of the word “gender” is still on the move. The same Wikipedia entry reports: *“in many contexts, even in some areas of social sciences, the meaning of gender has expanded to include “sex” or even to replace the latter word,”* and *“‘Gender’ is now commonly used even to refer to the physiology of non-human animals, without any implication of social gender roles.”*

This is a problem that has to be faced. Language has no policeman. It has no “state”. It is communistic. There are other problems with language in this same particular field of study (gender), as we shall see further on. These involve the inversion of meaning, or double (and opposite) meaning, of all the words that commonly refer to free-willing action, such as “subject”, “agent”, “author”, “actor”.

So, what do we mean by “Gender”? Let us take “we” in this case to mean the African National Congress.

The ANC uses the word “gender” to mean all of those social attributes that are socially attached to the biologically-defined human sexes: male, female or intermediate.

“Sexism” is the inappropriate attachment of social attributes to people defined in biological ways.

Human social relations are said to be “gendered” when they are affected by sexism.

The ANC adopted the aim of having a “non-sexist” society during the 1980s, in the last few years before its return to legality from banning and exile. Until then, the aim of the ANC had been expressed in the sentence: “One person one vote in a unitary state”.

Now, the Constitution of the ANC calls for a non-racist, non-sexist, democratic and prosperous society.

In the [Freedom Charter](#) of 1955, the word “gender” does not appear. The Freedom Charter says:

*“that only a democratic state, based on the will of all the people, can secure to all their birthright without distinction of colour, race, **sex** or belief;*

“Every man and woman shall have the right to vote for and to stand as a candidate for all bodies which make laws;

*“The rights of the people shall be the same, regardless of race, colour or **sex**;”*

Men and women of all races shall receive equal pay for equal work;

Clearly the Freedom Charter opposed wrongful (prejudiced or stereotyped) discrimination against anyone that would be based on their biological sex. This is what we, as the ANC, are talking about when we use the word “gender”. People must not have their opportunities in life inappropriately limited.

Theory

For the purposes of revolutionary theory, it is sometimes necessary to go further with the question of gender. Just as with the language, which will not stand still, so also the theoretical and philosophical ground keeps shifting.

Karl Marx, from at least the 1st [Thesis on Feuerbach](#) in 1845, and notably in the 11th Thesis (*“Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”*) was from the beginning and always thereafter concerned with restoring humanity to itself. The “Theses on Feuerbach” are where Marx’s writings become fully-developed “Marxism”.

A year earlier, Marx had written:

"In the approach to *woman* as the *spoil* and hand-maid of communal lust is expressed the infinite degradation in which man exists for himself, for the secret of this approach has its *unambiguous*, decisive, *plain* and undisguised expression in the relation of *man* to *woman* and in the manner in which the *direct* and *natural* species-relationship is conceived. The direct, natural, and necessary relation of person to person is the *relation of man* to *woman*. In this *natural* species-relationship man's relation to nature is immediately his relation to man, just as his relation to man is immediately his relation to nature – his own *natural* destination. In this relationship, therefore, is *sensuously manifested*, reduced to an observable *fact*, the extent to which the human essence has become nature to man, or to which nature to him has become the human essence of man. From this relationship one can therefore judge man's whole level of development. From the character of this relationship follows how much *man* as a *species-being*, as *man*, has come to be himself and to comprehend himself; the relation of man to woman is the *most natural* relation of human being to human being. It therefore reveals the extent to which man's *natural* behaviour has become *human*, or the extent to which the human essence in him has become a *natural* essence – the extent to which his *human nature* has come to be *natural* to him. This relationship also reveals the extent to which man's *need* has become a *human* need; the extent to which, therefore, the *other* person as a person has become for him a need – the extent to which he in his individual existence is at the same time a social being."

(Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, 1844, under [Private Property and Communism](#))

In all his writings, and especially in "Capital", Marx's fundamental concern was to find a way by which human beings could be restored to their full humanity.

This is also the sense in which Marxism and Communism are Humanist. The human being is one who can observe, reflect, think, plan and act upon thought. To say this is to be a humanist. It means that free will is the essence of humanity. This is an idea that is at least as old as the Bhagavad-Gita and the Book of Genesis, and which is carried over into Marxism.

[Christopher Caudwell](#) understood this when he wrote: "*I am a Communist because I believe in freedom*". The concept of freedom is the source of morality. "*This good, liberty, contains all good,*" wrote Caudwell. To deprive another of freedom is more than simply wrong and wicked. To a communist, it is the essence of wrongness.

The human who exercises free will is, in philosophy, called “The Subject”. Such a human has “agency”. We have already noted that these meanings are stalked by their opposites, so that a “subject” can also be a subordinate person, an “agent” can be a servant, and an “actor” can be somebody pretending. But we are here concerned with the first meanings: The Subject or Agent as a free-willing human.

We believe in Freedom. We call for Power, to the People.

Gender theory, as held by writers such as Luce Irigaray and [Judith Butler](#), has challenged this view. In doing so, such writers concur with the general body of philosophy known as Post-Modernism, which in various ways denies human free will and subjectivity. We will make an opportunity to discuss Butler’s ideas again during this course in relation to some of the anti-post-modernist philosopher [James Heartfield’s](#) writing, taken from his book “‘The Death of the Subject’ Explained”.

In the case of [Luce Irigaray](#), she holds that the free-willing human Subject, as previously understood, is a man. The freedom that we have all striven for is tainted because it is only a male kind of freedom, she says.

Irigaray holds that there are two different kinds of Subject, and so two kinds of freedom: male and female.

So, in the name of feminism, Irigaray and others are saying that beyond biology there is a gendered reality that must be respected, and not dismissed. In the name of feminism, social attributes of the female and the male are then restored to respectability and given moral force.

If we agree with this, then we have come full circle. From arguing for equal freedom, feminists like Irigaray have turned to arguing for “separate development” for women.

We, as ANC, do not agree. We, as Marxists, also do not agree.

We are as determined now as we were in the days of the Congress of the People in 1955 that adopted the Freedom Charter, that Freedom shall be the same for women as for men.

This is what we mean by “gender”.

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